

Revolution and Tradition in the Humanities Curriculum

by Thomas Fleming

A few years ago I found myself in the belly of the beast. To be more accurate, I was actually in the appendix of the beast, the Department of Education, giving a paper on curriculum reform. Secretary Bennett, who preceded me, spoke with his accustomed exuberance of the then current crisis in the humanities and of the need to recover our inheritance. When the time came for me to speak, I could not help remarking upon how familiar it all seemed. For nearly eighty years conservatives like Irving Babbitt, Albert Jay Nock, and Russell Kirk had been complaining about the state of American education, and the worse things got, the milder the criticism had grown. Babbitt would have restored the classics to their preeminence, Nock wanted to educate only a saving remnant, but Mr. Bennett was willing to settle for a few readable books that promoted democratic ideals. In educational criticism, as in education, there has been a Hesiodic progression from an Age of Gold to the Age of Iron in which we find ourselves.

The decline is nowhere more apparent than in the most recent controversies over curriculum. The strife surrounding Stanford's decision to abolish its "Western culture" course in favor of something more sensitive to the needs of minorities attracted a great deal of attention in the press. Who can forget the images of Jesse Jackson leading his band of Red Guard cultural revolutionaries in the chant, "Hey Hey Ho Ho, Western Culture's gotta go"? Or

Secretary Bennett's spirited defense of the old curriculum as a bedrock of democratic values?

The opposition to what is now called Eurocentrism is a Rainbow coalition of blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Indians, feminists (I deliberately do not say women), homosexuals, and guilt-ridden white males, all of whom claim to have been repressed by a civilization of sexist, racist, and capitalist white Christian males. Do I exaggerate? New York State's report "A Curriculum of Inclusion" begins with this already much-quoted sentence:

African Americans, Asian Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos, and Native Americans have all been the victims of intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and the European American world for centuries.

Is this debate really important or is it only a tempest in the very small humanities teapot? I for one think it is very important, more important perhaps than the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and more poisonous to our culture than the AIDS epidemic.

Every society, civilized or not, has a curriculum. Children everywhere have to learn the techniques of survival and the lore of the tribe; they must learn to recognize who is who in the band, and the approved methods of propitiating the gods or spirits upon whom all life depends. In the ancient world, the curriculum bears a strong resemblance to primitive practice. Greek boys, in addition to their instruction in militaristic sports, memorized Homer, learned to read and write and do simple math. They were also taught the lore

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and social mechanics of Thebes, Miletos, or Athens. By the fifth century, city-dwelling Greeks of the middle and upper classes were making sure that their boys received instruction in the arts of public speaking and debate, and this rhetorical curriculum dominated ancient higher education down to the very end of antiquity.

The object of this education was, in Quintilian's phrase, a "good man skilled in speaking," by which the Roman rhetorician meant a man whose morals and training fitted him to be of some use to his society. This emphasis on rhetoric was to outlast even the fall of Rome. The medieval curriculum, while derived directly from ancient practice as well as from ancient handbooks and treatises, was necessarily different, since it was adapted to the needs of the church, but the differences may be less significant than the continuity.

The same can be said of the first great curriculum reform known as the Renaissance. The main "project" of the Renaissance humanists was educational, and despite the various waves of change and reform, the 14th-century ideals of Petrarch and his successors were institutionalized as the core of humane learning and remained in force down to the early decades of the 20th century.

Throughout its long history, the classical curriculum was traditional in form and outlook. There was reform, of course, and even progress, but the core remained the teaching of ancient languages and ancient literature.

Even at the height of its power and influence, the classical curriculum did not go unchallenged, and beginning at least with John Locke, Enlightenment thinkers in Britain and France set about their quiet work of curriculum revolution—the first such revolution in the history of education.

That it was meant as a revolution can be seen on nearly every page of Rousseau's pedagogical novel, *Emile*, in which the author instructs us to "Take the exact reverse of current practice and you will almost always do right." But the educational ideas of Rousseau and Helvétius and the other Enlightenment intellectuals had to remain on the drawing board, until the French Revolution furnished both the will and the means to do something about refashioning the human race.

Among the business pursued by the various revolutionary assemblies was a series of reports and commissions on what to do about French education. The authors of these reports were among the brightest intellectual stars of the revolution: Mirabeau, Talleyrand, and Condorcet. Each had his pet theory to push and favorite hobbyhorse to ride, but they were in accord on several basic principles: 1) that education was the business of the nation and therefore the responsibility of the state; 2) that a new education was needed for the new species of man that would live in post-revolutionary France—the classics were out; 3) that education should be nationalistic and ideological in preparing the minds of citizens.

In the infant republic of the United States, there were also Enlightenment intellectuals who opposed the classical curriculum, but their ideas made little headway in the first hundred years of our nation's history. Our ancestors saw themselves in the mirror of antiquity, and it was not by some historical accident that Jefferson and Adams and Madison turned constantly to ancient examples in their deliberations on the best form of government for the new United States.

They chose to set up a free republic, and that choice was determined by their reading of the classics. The decay of republican government, by the way, exactly coincides with the decay of the classical curriculum.

However, by the turn of this century, the Progressives were firmly in the saddle, both in politics and in education. Presidents Roosevelt and Wilson beat the drum mercilessly for change and progress, and a new generation of professional educators finally adopted the principles of Diderot, Mirabeau, and Condorcet in the same way that our political leaders adopted the principles of Robespierre. This was not, I remind you, simply a change in content or technique. The educational reformers of the early 20th century wanted to remake human nature. In the Soviet Union they were to speak of the New Soviet Man, and in the United States the followers of John Dewey would give us the New Democratic Man. Woodrow Wilson, himself an ex-college president, summed up the aims of the new education in 1914: "The use of a university," he said, "is to make young gentlemen as unlike their fathers as possible," and universities ever since have been working hard to turn students against their parents' ideals.

The revolution was made in the period between Charles Eliot's appointment as president of Harvard in 1869 and John Dewey's retirement from Columbia in 1930. Eliot devoted much of his career at Harvard to promoting an elective system that, in the end, required only French. If some teachers and some students could not survive under a system that stressed individual responsibility and competition, then that was just as well, since Eliot's vision of the university, like his vision of life, was essentially a genteel form of social Darwinism.

Dewey, on the other hand, was not only a democrat but a statist and an anti-individualist. It was up to the nation collectively to decide what its goals were and how its children should be brought up to strive for those goals. America was an experiment in democracy, and for that experiment to succeed, it must indoctrinate its students for life in a society where people were committed to taking care of each other.

Under the influence of these and other educational leaders, American colleges and high schools abandoned Latin to the tender mercies of student choice, and let in a flood of new studies, first in the humanities and sciences and next in the social sciences. Since Eliot's elective system was far too elitist and libertarian to win widespread support, college administrators picked and chose from among the new disciplines to find an alternative both to freedom and to tradition. What had been a coherent curriculum, refined by experience and precedent, turned into a grab bag of electives, whose only shape was determined by a loose set of core requirements. Where I went to school in the 1960's, this meant one or two years of English, two years of history, two years of foreign language, one of science, and one of mathematics. Of course, this same reactionary college imposed an additional requirement on anyone wanting to graduate with an A.B.: four years of college-level Latin or Greek.

At most schools, however, the requirements were looser and less coherent: no history requirement but a social

science requirement that could be fulfilled with history, psychology, or sociology; the math unit could be satisfied with logic; and science by kitchen chemistry or amateur astronomy or even "geography." At Chapel Hill I met a student satisfying a requirement by taking "Foods of the World."

Oh, there were dissident voices, and here and there a Great Books program (as at the University of Chicago under Hutchins) or a humanities core (as at the University of Wisconsin under Meiklejohn), but these half-measures, while they did highlight the failure of the progressive curriculum, were a poor substitute for a traditional curriculum that had been evolving over more than two millennia. Like so many "conservative" experiments, these humanities curricula were the products of a loyal opposition that wanted to hold onto a few trinkets of the old order without rejecting the broad goals of the revolution. A conservatism dedicated to preserving last year's progressivism is doomed to failure, if only because the general course of revolution is almost always to the left. As Daniel Bell has remarked of Robert Hutchins' reforms at the University of Chicago, "All revolutions fade and after a while look tedious to their successors."

Those successors had revolutionary projects of their own. Beginning in the 60's, New Left Marxists fought for the power to teach critical theory, blacks set up black studies curricula, and feminists invented women's studies; all this was tolerated by the grumbling defenders of the progressive curriculum, but capitulation never resolves a struggle, and timidity only invites more claims.

This takes us to the present time and the controversy over "diversity." On the radical side, minority representatives are demanding inclusion and eventual dominance over the humanities curriculum. By themselves, ethnic and sexual minorities could do nothing, and their success is owed to the collaboration of their liberal and radical colleagues who rail against the culture they are paid to uphold.

The main point is not, we must remember, an appreciation of oriental, African, and Native American cultures. That would require a serious study of difficult foreign languages, anthropology, and religion—no, the point remains what it has always been in curriculum reform: a militant resentment against the traditions and institutions of civilized life.

The rootless and uncivilized professoriat is, for this reason, willing to endorse the claims made by blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Indians, and homosexuals—all in the name of pluralism and diversity. Professors can hardly be expected to defend a civilization they have never been part of, and their self-hatred and self-contempt—the mark of the beast that is engraved upon losers and weaklings everywhere—spills over into hatred and contempt for the entire culture of the West.

A recent conference at Rutgers assembled as distinguished a group of these cultural rebels as you could find. It was a mixed group of minority rights advocates and establishment leftists, willing to make reforms so long as the status quo is not threatened. Among the latter group, Leon Botstein, president of Bard, plainly thought that the radicals were ruining their own revolution by "slugging it out over 10 percent of the curriculum." He nonetheless excoriated

the "false nostalgia" of the old curriculum's defenders. Speaking for the future, however, was a dean of something called Clarion State College, who told the group that "retraining" the tradition-bound faculty would be a major part of the reforms they had in mind.

This call for reeducation is an all-too-common feature of contemporary thought control in universities, which are jettisoning all requirements but one: minority sensitivity classes for freshmen.

I think we should not be too harsh in criticizing the current crop of curriculum reformers. Their hostility to Western civilization is only the natural outcome of their own educational experiences. Imagine the case of a professor of 20th-century English or political science—a Botstein or a dean of Clarion. He will have been exposed, in his graduate school days, to a few snippets of Milton and Pope or Aristotle and Cicero, but lacking any training in ancient languages or history, his textbook initiation into the classics will have only confirmed his antipathy to the traditions of humane learning. Ignorant, themselves, of all the things that used to define an educated man, many younger humanities and social science professors inevitably resent the larger part of the content of Western Civ. courses. They are, therefore, perfectly content to give way to the demands of minority groups that may be, in fact, statistically insignificant.

The motives are particularly clear in discussion of Native American Indian studies. Spokesmen for so-called Native Americans, a group of peoples that has virtually no literature and no history apart from what is written about them by their enemies, have been demanding a large share of humanities and history instruction in elementary and high schools.

Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and homosexuals all make similar claims, all in the name of pluralism and diversity. As one semi-official tract, "In Praise of Diversity," puts it: "Finally, the time has come to celebrate the diversity that characterizes a country in which some three hundred different native American Indian tribes were joined by numerous peoples from every continent and every country on this planet." What time is left for a recognition that our language and our legal and political systems are derived from Britain, our culture an inheritance from ancient Greece and Rome and from medieval and modern Europe? Very little.

But who stands on the other side, what champions do we have defending this old civilization of ours? Sullen and disgruntled progressives, for the most part. Some of them at Stanford defended the humanities curriculum on the grounds that it was useful for teaching students how bigoted we have been in the past.

The most famous critic of the curriculum in recent years is Allan Bloom, whose *Closing of the American Mind* must be the most unreadable best-seller of all time. Most of what Bloom says by way of negative criticism is unexceptionable, although it has been said better by earlier critics like Thomas Molnar, Jacques Barzun, and Albert Jay Nock. But like so many lukewarm conservatives, Bloom wants to have his cake and eat it. He wants to criticize the students, faculty, and curriculum of the modern university, and he is even willing to criticize some aspects of modernism itself. There are,

however, sticking points, particularly religion. Bloom, like so many others of his philosophical sect—the unworthy disciples of the late Leo Strauss—are stuck in one of Condorcet's earlier phases of progress, the stage at which philosophy replaces religion. Religion, for Bloom, is irrational superstition masquerading as truth, and it is the philosopher's role to combat error on this right flank while at the same time giving battle to philosophy's successor, science, on the left. It is all rather quaint and 18th-centuryish.

The trouble with the defenders of the so-called "traditional curriculum" is that they are all reformers who refuse to recognize that a revolution took place at the beginning of this century, and any attempt to preserve or improve the status quo is worse than futile. We do not need reform, we need a counterrevolution. Caution and moderation will only get in the way. It is better for the ship of higher education to sink, with all its rats on board. Any effort to preserve or improve American universities will only confirm the government-backed monopoly.

Most reformers labor under the delusion that the federal government can be used to fix things up. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Government may regulate, but it cannot create and it cannot innovate. Above all, government can never undo its mistakes, except at the point of a gun or at the bottom of an empty cash register. Government's first motto is "Never apologize, never explain."

The federal government's efforts at curriculum reform are utterly predictable. The U.S. Department of Education has its own model curriculum for a James Madison High School, and back in October the admirable Mrs. Cheney unveiled her own *50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students*. This model includes, in addition to two whole years of foreign languages, three semesters of World Civ. from Moses and Homer to Richard Wright but also including that Mayan masterpiece, *Popol Vuh*, and a one-year course on the glories of the social sciences. There is room for everything and everyone in the NEH's curriculum; everything, that is, but a serious grounding in our own civilization.

Such a grounding is not something to be acquired from reading a handbook or parroting the platitudes of Western values. Conservatives are fond of quoting T.S. Eliot by way of Russell Kirk on the importance of the permanent things. We complain, with considerable justification, about the decline in all our cultural standards. The first step, then, is to quit complaining and work hard at exemplifying the highest standards of our civilization. Civilization, like charity, begins at home, and the time has come for conservatives to clean their own house.


Who has not heard story after story about conservative leaders who bought or "arranged" their doctorates, who were found guilty of plagiarism, perjury, or fraud? Perhaps this explains the new popularity that Dr. Martin Luther King enjoys among Big Government conservatives. The "Doctor" should now be understood as strictly a courtesy title, since King, it has been recently revealed, apparently plagiarized his Boston University doctoral dissertation. King's phoney Ph.D. is enough to make him a hero to at least one self-described "progressive" conservative foundation executive who bought his degree from a storefront diploma mill in Florida and now passes on academic grants

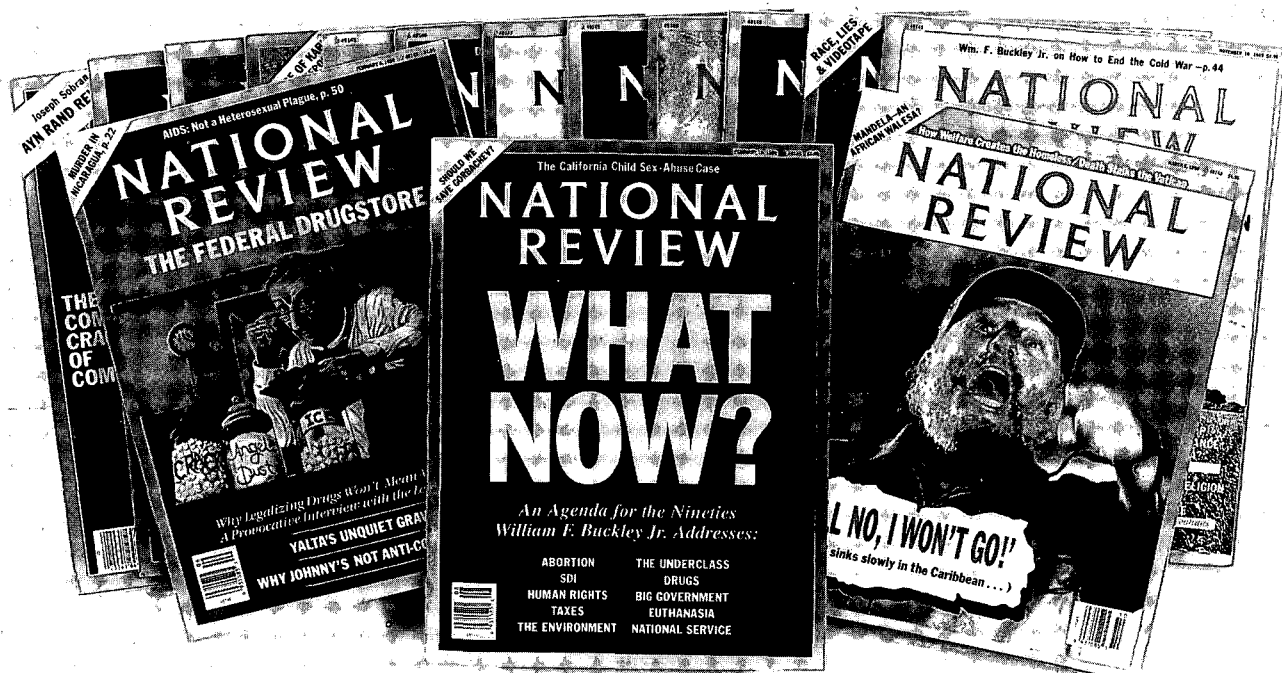
that add up to millions every year. It is people like this who today control the conservative movement. If conservatives are serious about upholding the permanent things, then they should see to it that those who are holding this banner do not, by their character, incompetence, and behavior, disgrace it.

No sensible person should take sides in this battle between radical progressives and progressive conservatives. But there are two goals—both of them probably impossible—toward which we could direct our efforts in the confidence that we would not be wasting our energies, two goals that are so worthy in themselves that any regress—no matter how slight—in their direction would confer some lasting benefit. The first goal is strictly reactionary: restore the classical curriculum of the 19th century and beef it up with a suitable amount of math and science courses. As a practical measure, this would involve reinstituting an A.B. degree of the type I had to endure at Charleston College in the 1960's. In the current context, this would mean offering a special degree certifying that each recipient had received a certain amount of Greek and Latin, say 36 or 40 hours, as well as a roughly similar number of hours in his major.

The advantages of a classical A.B. are too numerous and obvious to mention. For one thing, it would mean an English or history major could once again hold his own in the company of chemistry and math students. Fashionable law schools and top medical schools would begin giving preference to A.B.'s, because they had demonstrated a capacity for hard work and an appreciation of the power of snobbery in American professional life. The possibilities are endless.

The A.B. is impossible, some will say, and the classics cannot be revived for political reasons. Surely there must be an alternative. There is: it is called deregulation, the second goal, which goes by the road of anarchism rather than reaction. Since the days of President Eliot, educators have been talking about the needs of the students. We are always being told, in the case of dress codes, co-ed dormitories, and campus cultural events, that students are mature men and women who know what they want. Fine, then, let them have it. Abolish all university-wide restrictions and do away with tenure. Turn each faculty member into an independent contractor, something like a paperboy, who is not paid a fixed salary but a commission for every paper he sells on his route. Teachers who are popular for whatever reason—for their sex appeal, their low standards, or even for their merits as scholars and teachers—would be paid commensurate with the number of students they attracted. Others would starve.

The students, of course, would have to learn to accept responsibility for their own lives, that is, assuming they wanted to go to a professional school. They would not, for the most part, sign up for many courses in American literature or film appreciation, but then those "Lite College" courses (all the credit hours with only half the content) are increasingly dominated by Marxists, feminists, and other radicals. In a Free University, decent American kids would no longer have to sit through boring rants on what it was like in the 60's. Even a classical A.B. might turn out to have a fighting chance in a free-market system. 



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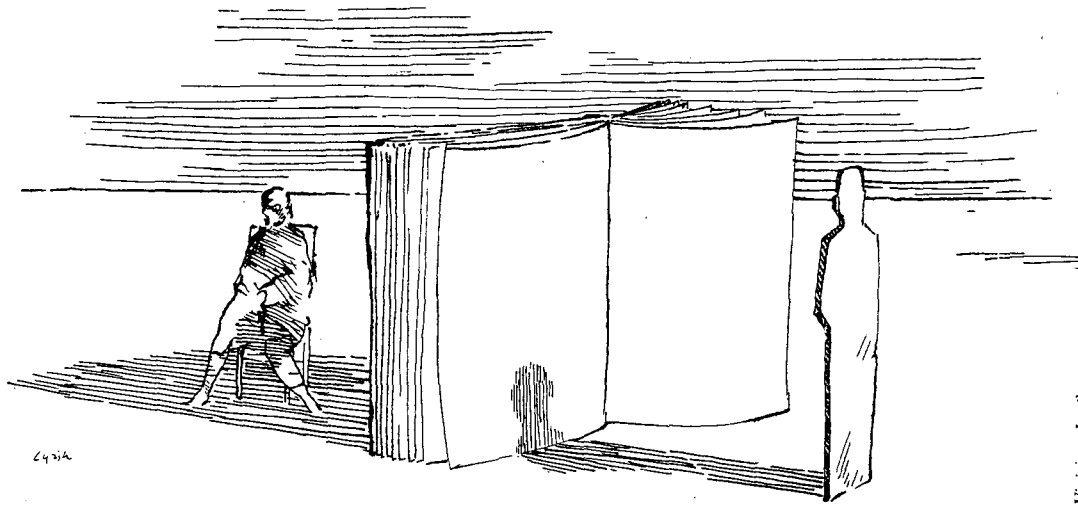
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SACHRON



Another Part of the Forest

by E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

Just after receiving an invitation from the editor of *Chronicles* to write about the college humanities curriculum, I received a letter from a friend and ally in education reform. It expressed alarm that "I had gone over to the other side" — an opinion that started, according to his letter, when I declined to label myself a conservative in a Williams College symposium on the humanities. My reluctance was reported as craven apostasy by Roger Kimball in the *New Criterion*, and reprinted in his book *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*. My friend's comment about the "other side" indicates succinctly the embattled mind-set in which the great curriculum wars over the preservation of our culture are now being fought. In this wartime atmosphere, declining to be labeled a conservative and "going over to the other side" are synonymous acts.

Within the space of a few weeks I was attacked from both sides of the battle lines with equal vigor, by Barbara Herrnstein Smith (a full-fledged "tenured radical" at Duke University) and by Roger Kimball (the bane of tenured radicals). The former scorned me as a conservative, the latter as an apostate and coward — possibly morally worse than the tenured radicals themselves. A special place in hell is reserved for trimmers.

In the current debate over the humanities curriculum, what is at stake may not be salvation but complexity. I freely grant that there comes a moment in political and intellectual affairs when complex and hesitant middle positions are unacceptable, and one has to choose sides in a shooting war. But it is a grave mistake to believe we have reached that point in the cultural debates in this country. Moreover, from

the standpoint of education reform, which is my main concern, this polarization of positions, if persisted in, could deny the conservative point of view any substantive influence over the course that reform will take, as I shall momentarily explain.

But first I wish to deal with the connection between political polarization and apostasy. The subtext of my friend's letter was: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who was with me (as I thought), but denies it, is a kind of Judas." In this either/or atmosphere, the first casualties are subtlety and complexity. For example, take Mr. Kimball's description of my apostasy in the ideologically uncharged sphere of interpretation theory. It was my supposed "recantation" at Williams, as reported by Kimball, that has made my friend and others believe that the "pressure" has gotten to me, and I have gone over to the "other" side.

Kimball's account ran this way. I used to be an honorable defender of rationality and objectivity in literary scholarship. But now, to avoid unpopularity and the C-word, and to curry favor with the tenured radicals, I have abandoned my earlier positions and claim to hold views about interpretation that are scarcely to be distinguished from those of the tenured radicals themselves. Thus Kimball (in his book):

For someone as desperate as Professor Hirsch to disencumber himself from the label conservative, it must have been galling to be reminded of his former sins — especially by Derrida, an enormously celebrated writer whose entire *oeuvre* stands in the most glaring contradiction to Professor Hirsch's own earlier ideas. Poor Professor Hirsch declared that people had once again been wrong to see him as a conservative, and then favored us with a little

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